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Exclusive Reports

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Expected bioterror battle cost: \$25M

Troy May

Santa Clara Valley Health and Hospital System has placed a \$25 million price tag on a two-year plan to prepare the county for a bioterrorism attack, a figure double that of just a month ago.

Santa Clara County hospitals are working with the county Public Health Department to prepare this area for the worst.

Besides the health department, the health and hospital system includes Valley Medical Center. On Oct. 18, CEOs from area hospitals met with health department officials to discuss strategies in the event of an attack.

Also in October, the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors appropriated \$5 million for the health department and emergency services to purchase equipment needed to prepare for a bioterrorism attack.

"By the time we approved this, it was already spent," says James Beall, chairman of the county Board of Supervisors.

County officials are focusing on four different areas to prepare for an attack:

- Personal protection equipment;
- Chemical and biological detection and decontamination equipment;
- Public health intervention and pharmaceuticals; and
- Training and backup for personnel pulled off regular assignment.

The county health department has been preparing for a bioterrorism attack for the past three years. Since the Sept. 11 terrorist assaults on the East Coast, the county has taken a more serious look at its ability to respond quickly to a bioterrorism attack. Several weeks ago, it mailed a booklet to doctors and other health-care personnel outlining a response plan for the public health system in the wake of a bioterrorism attack. As a result, county officials have created a list of resources needed to protect the residents of Santa Clara County.

Infectious diseases such as smallpox and ebola would be handled only at the CDC, which is equipped with "moonsuits"

Another step is to stockpile antibiotics that can be used to treat various forms of bacteria that could be used in

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County officials have asked all hospitals to assess how many beds they could open quickly in any space available. In addition, hospitals are looking at their inventory levels, security and decontamination equipment.

"This is going to be an expensive endeavor," says Jane Bero, CEO of O'Connor Hospital in San Jose. How much it

And cost is an issue for the county in the wake of an economic downturn. The county public health budget is \$75.6 million a year, not nearly enough to pay for bioterrorism preparedness, say local health officials.

There are proposed sources of funds at the federal and state level.

Mr. Sillen says most of the money likely will come from the federal government. He already has had a one-on-one meeting with U.S. Rep. Mike Honda, D-San Jose, about funding.

In response to cries from public health departments across the country, Mr. Honda is sponsoring a \$7 billion funding package introduced in October to help local public health and emergency service officials prepare for bioterrorism.

At the state level, Gov. Gray Davis is considering a proposal to increase the state's sales tax by a quarter percent to fund antibioterrorism action plans at the state and local level. (See related story on this page).

"We are spending the money no matter what, we can't wait," says Mr. Beall.

Troy May covers health care and health sciences for the Business Journal.



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